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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the major results of Phase I of the National PTA's Urban Education Project. The project goal was to identify urban school and community problems, to focus national attention on them, and to develop new approaches to resolving them. Public hearings in six major cities and a national conference were held to accomplish this goal. Critical problems identified were: (1) inadequate public financing of education; (2) lack of parental or community involvement in schools; (3) low academic achievement and poor student performance; (4) inability of schools to meet diverse student needs; (5) general unemployment/youth unemployment; (6) negative public attitudes about public education; (7) financial overburden of urban school districts; (8) general violence in schools and communities; and (9) the tie between discipline and preparation of teachers. In order to resolve these problems the PTA Urban Advisory Task Force sought to facilitate the building of coalitions of local, state, and national organizations. An action plan was formulated to include issues around which coalitions should be built, strategies that involve students and parents as change agents, ways the Urban Advisory Task Force can help, and specific techniques to assist coalitions in meeting their goals. (MK)

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A SUMMARY REPORT ON

The PTA in the Urban Context:

THE URBAN EDUCATION PROJECT
PHASE I

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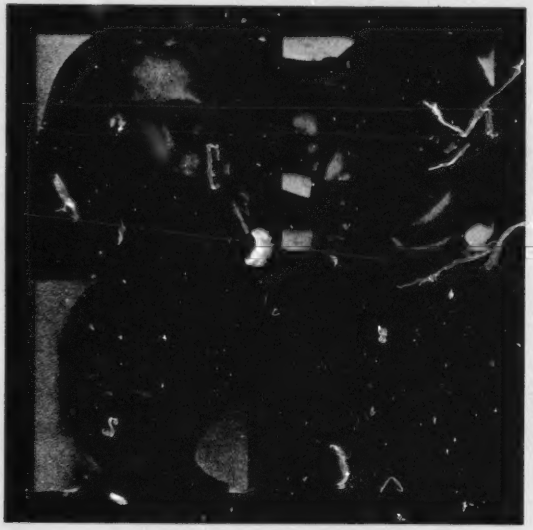

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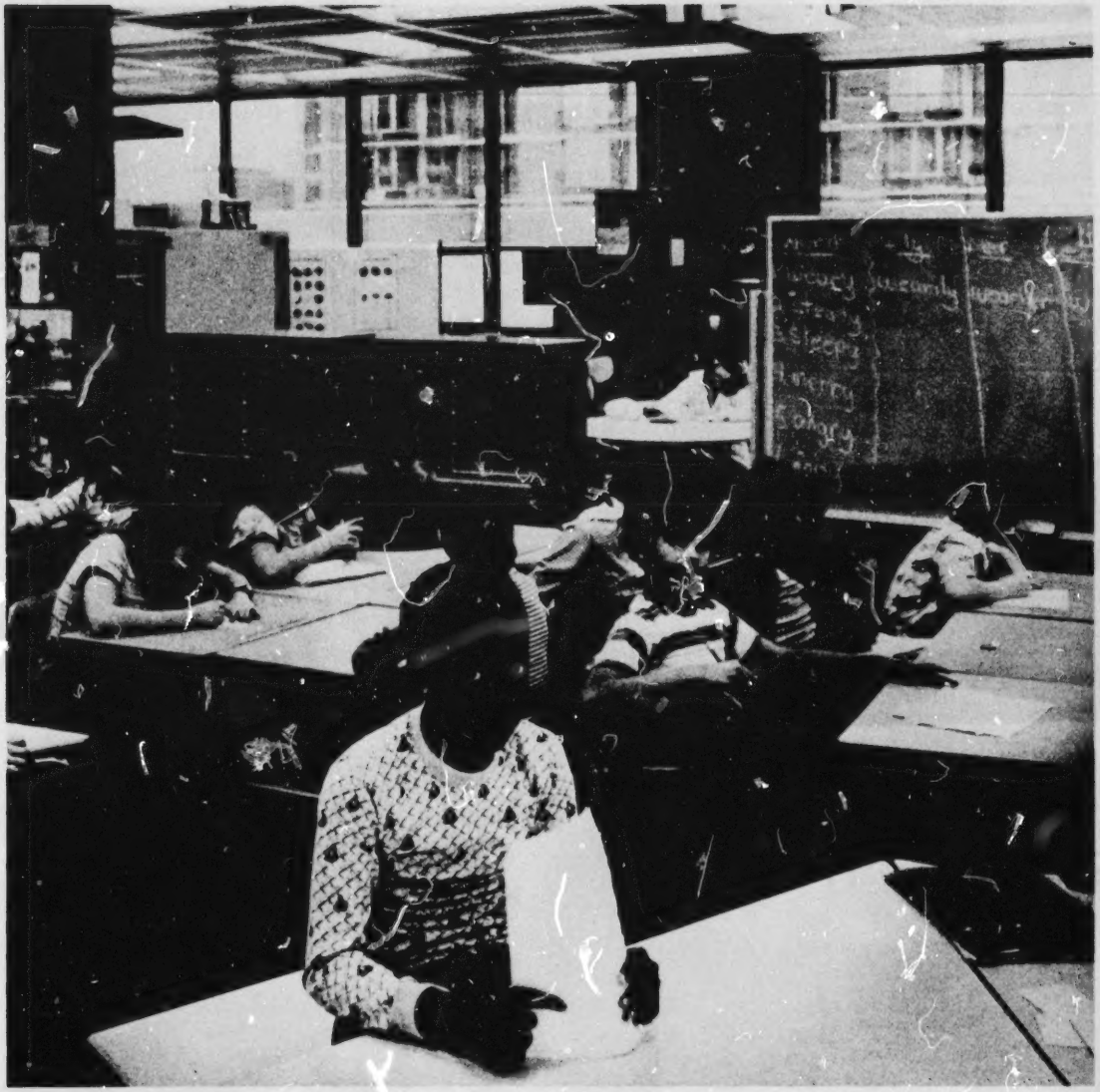
The National PTA



Introduction

The National PTA has long committed itself to reversing the deterioration of human lives in urban centers by identifying urban school and community problems, and, at the same time, by emphasizing the actual and potential strengths of diverse publics collaborating and resolving these problems.

The Urban Education Project was implemented in 1977 to help the National PTA to continue to realize these goals. During November of that year, Grace Baisinger, then president of the National PTA, asked numerous people to serve on the Urban Advisory Task Force which she chaired. Parents, PTA officers, educators, and health care and social service providers were invited. So were business and labor leaders, government officials, and representatives of other organizations.

By September 1978, the 39-member Urban Advisory Task Force concluded that public hearings would be the most effective way of gathering information on important, recurring problems and issues facing urban centers and schools.

Between November 1978 and March 1979, six hearings were held in Philadelphia, Seattle, Houston, Miami, Kansas City (Missouri), and Detroit. The National PTA's theme for each hearing was "The PTA Challenges the Cities: What Can We *Do* for Our Schools?"

In all, 246 people attended the hearings. Testifiers included business leaders, teachers, students, government officials, labor leaders, clergy, PTA members, community leaders, and parents. The four principal objectives of the hearings were:

- To identify the crucial problems confronting urban areas and their schools.
- To select the most pressing concerns.
- To examine effective ways in which various cities are responding to these challenges.
- To develop new and dynamic strategies for solving urban problems, with parents being the leading force in this endeavor.

After the hearings were conducted, a National Conference, entitled "The PTA Challenges the Nation's Leaders: What Can We *Do* for Our Schools?" was held at the HEW Building in Washington, D.C. Fourteen participants from diverse national organizations and federal agencies shared with the Task Force their concerns and perceptions about the problems that had been identified at the hearings.

This report summarizes the major results of Phase I of the Urban Education Project—a period ranging from the formation of the Urban Advisory Task Force in November 1977 to the National Conference of May 1979.

The first section presents a general analysis of the problems, possible solutions, and resources that relate to urban issues discussed by testifiers at the six hearing sites and by conferees at the National Conference. The second section highlights the outcomes of Phase I and discusses strategies for the future.

Before we begin, I would like to extend my personal thanks to the Urban Advisory Task Force and the following people who helped to make this project a pleasant learning experience:

National PTA:

Grace Baisinger, Immediate Past President
Virginia Sparling, President
Harley McMillen, Director of Program Development
Becky Schergens, Executive Director
Sandra Fink, Director of Public Relations

Local PTA Hearing Coordinators:

Anna Lee Dowling, Philadelphia
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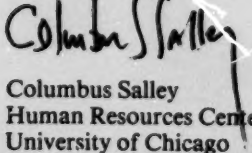

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December 1979

General Analysis of the Six Hearings and National Conference

During the course of the six hearings and National Conference, a number of views emerged among testifiers. Some opinions often were repeated, while others were unique—reflecting the differences of the groups themselves and their particular circumstances.

This section discusses these views. No attempt has been made to evaluate how effective the cities have been in dealing with challenges posed by their individual areas.

Cross-Site Analysis

The following table places all the testifiers at the hearings into general groupings in order to determine their collective views on urban issues and problems.

Number of Testifiers by Group and Hearing

Group	Miami	Seattle	Philadelphia	Houston	Kansas City	Detroit	Totals	%
PTA	2	5	3	6	5	3	24	9.8
Business	3	2	8	1	4	4	22	8.9
School Leaders	10	4	5	10	13	8	50	20.3
Students	1	3	3	1	3	5	16	6.5
Community Leaders	5	6	1	3	1	4	20	8.1
Teachers	1	3	1	0	0	0	5	2.0
Labor Leaders	0	4	2	1	0	0	7	2.8
Government Officials	10	19	14	4	10	19	76	30.9
Clergy	2	1	1	1	1	0	6	2.4
Citizens/Parents	6	3	4	3	2	2	20	8.1
Totals	**40**	**50**	**42**	**30**	**39**	**45**	**246**	**100.0**

Summary of Results

The Hearings

Based on the frequency that certain issues were raised during the hearings, ten critical problems were identified. Considering the three problems cited most often at each hearing site, the following list presents the ten most important issues in order of priority.*

1. Inadequate financing of public education.
2. Lack of parental or broad-based community participation in schools.
3. Low academic achievement and poor student performance.
4. Inability of schools to meet diverse needs of students.
5. General unemployment/youth unemployment.
6. Negative public attitudes about public education.
7. Financial overburden of urban school districts.
8. General violence in both schools and communities.

9/10. Tie between discipline and preparation of teachers.

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* The reader should note that the majority of testifiers did not prioritize the original list of concerns presented to them, as requested by the Task Force. So, the criterion for interpreting the degree of importance attached to each of their concerns became the number of times certain problems were cited.

Also, many testifiers did not mention all the concerns of the Task Force, thus creating a distortion as to the significance that could be assigned to any particular problem. And most participants viewed the problems as being interrelated. In fact, some issues were identified as symptoms rather than problems.

The most popular solution of those offered by the testifiers was establishing collaborative partnerships which involve diverse organizations, teachers, and students. The solution second in popularity was promoting parental involvement in the total process of education.

By far, testifiers most frequently named local resources as the most effective way of handling the problems. This suggests that hearing participants feel more comfortable using local initiatives rather than state or federal ones.

In trying to determine a "consensus" among the various groups of testifiers, further analysis of their views led to these findings:

School leaders often point to negative public attitudes about public education as a major problem. *Community leaders* view inadequate financing, lack of parental involvement, and low academic achievement as top problems.

According to *school leaders, government officials,* and *community leaders,* one workable solution is to establish collaborative partnerships. *PTA* groups favor more parental involvement as an answer to urban problems. And *students* seek solutions to their perceived urban school problems through special programs designed to improve student achievement.

Business people, school leaders, students, and *government officials* would rely more heavily on local resources in dealing with urban issues. On the other hand, *PTA members* and *labor/community leaders* would depend on a combination of local, state, and federal resources.

The National Conference

During the National Conference, which followed the six public hearings, participants were asked to respond to the top five of the ten critical problems identified through the hearings. Thus, conferees did not add to the list of problems. Instead, their responses provided useful data regarding the views and strategies of representative national organizations in dealing with these recurring issues.

Additionally, the expert opinions of the conferees corroborated a view that was emerging among members of the Task Force: The educational issues that surfaced during the public hearings are not solely the problems of six large urban school systems, but represent the problems of public education throughout the United States, in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Phase I
Outcomes and Discussion of Future Actions

With its formation in 1977, the Urban Education Project was developed to help the National PTA achieve certain goals. Specifically, the objectives of the Urban Education Project were:

- To focus national attention on the problems of urban areas, and especially the schools within them.
- To develop new, dynamic approaches in resolving these problems, including the development of new alliances or coalitions.
- To encourage parents to act as the leading force in this endeavor.

As one step toward realizing these goals, six public hearings and a National Conference were held to serve as forums where parents, students, civic leaders, school administrators, national leaders, and other interested individuals could discuss urgent educational problems of the cities. Participants also had the opportunity to suggest possible solutions.

In this regard, the hearings and conference were quite successful. But, given the sheer complexity of the problems that accompany urban life and the schools, neither the National PTA nor the Urban Advisory Task Force expected to meet all of their stated objectives in the two years since the formation of the Urban Education Project.

What has been accomplished, however, is a strong data base that provides the rationale for future actions on the part of the Urban Advisory Task Force.

Review of Outcomes

1. National Attention

The six hearings and the National Conference themselves generated public interest and participation among citizens. In order to gain maximum coverage in the media, the National PTA designed a comprehensive publicity plan for each site. Newspaper, radio, and television coverage of the hearings created national awareness of the Urban Education Project and its concerns regarding urban areas and the schools.

The media also provided coverage of hearing proceedings and interviews with Task Force members and PTA staff. In addition, radio and TV spots were used to promote interest in the hearings.

The National Conference in Washington, D.C., was a culminating act in drawing attention throughout the country, when 14 national organizations provided their perspectives on urban issues.

The National PTA plans to sustain national attention on the plight and opportunities of urban areas, particularly with its efforts toward resolving the urban education issues raised at the hearings and conference.

2. Identification of Crucial Urban Problems

The National PTA collected valuable data on urban areas and schools through the six hearings and the National Conference. From this information, the ten problems most frequently cited by testifiers have been identified. Now the Task Force can determine the most pressing problems of the ten and plan for action.

The hearings and conference had additional impact. They confirmed many views and perceptions by the Task Force about the broad scope of problems faced by urban constituencies.

3. The Beginnings of Local and National Coalitions

Public discussion of urban education problems at the hearings and National Conference led to a dynamic concept of linking certain organizations with the PTA to address important issues. Different alliances would be developed to work toward the common goals of each organization for urban education. These new coalitions would join concerned individuals and groups with organizations at the local, state, and national levels.

Coalitions of this nature already have been initiated by these actions. Results of the hearings and conference were sent to local and state PTA officers, testifiers, conferees, and various public and educational leaders of the cities where the meetings were held. Local or state PTA officials have arranged follow-up sessions with testifiers so that results can be discussed in detail and new coalitions can be formed to address the problems of their urban schools. The staff of the National PTA will extend assistance and consultation at each of the cities to help in coalition-building efforts.

10

Task Force Actions

On August 22, 1979, National PTA President Virginia Sparling sent a letter to members of the Urban Advisory Task Force. She asked them to recommend future actions for the National PTA in addressing the problems identified through Phase I activities.

The majority of responses to Mrs. Sparling's letter indicated that coalition building at all levels should prove instrumental in helping to solve the complex problems of urban education. Task Force members often mentioned that since solutions are beyond the resources of any single organization—including the National PTA—the role of the National PTA should be that of facilitator in the development of local, state, and national alliances.

The Urban Advisory Task Force outlined these necessary steps for coalition building:

1. Identify mutual concerns and goals for urban education among the different groups of individuals and organizations.

2. Arrange meetings to establish the potential benefits of coordinated, joint actions on the problems of urban education.

3. Develop mutually agreed upon courses of action that could be implemented, in part or as a whole, through joint efforts.

4. Develop a management plan and allocate tasks among coalition members to undertake courses of action.

Once the objective to build coalitions had been established among Task Force members, one question still remained: Coalitions for *what*?

The Task Force reconvened in Chicago on October 23, 1979, to respond to this question, on the basis of the findings of Phase I activities. A subcommittee was then formed to develop a plan of action for the National PTA.

The action plan, which the National PTA will release in February 1980, will include: issues or themes around which coalitions will be built, strategies that involve students and parents as change agents, ways that the Urban Advisory Task Force can help, and specific techniques that will assist local and national coalitions in meeting their goals.

Members of the Urban Advisory Task Force

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George Brown, Immediate Past Lieutenant Governor of Colorado and Vice-president of Marketing, Grumman Ecosystems Corporation
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